

Rules of the Game

Unarmed Attacks (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Most **D&D** characters have a vast array of weaponry available to them. Lethal implements such as swords, maces, and spears are seldom out of reach, and many characters also wield deadly spells. Still, a simple kick, head butt, or punch has its place in the game, too, especially when dealing with the unexpected.



The rules for attacking without weapons contain a few odd twists that can throw off players and DMs who don't use them often, and characters who make **unarmed attacks** into an art, such as monks, can pose some special problems as well. This series explores unarmed attacks in detail, and seeks to throw some light into the territory's murkier corners.

The Language of Unarmed Attacks

Here are a few terms you'll encounter in this article.

Free Hand: For a humanoid or other bipedal character, a hand that's not occupied with holding or wielding a weapon or other object, or being used for some other purpose, such as clinging to a wall.

Iterative Attack: One or more extra attacks a character gains by virtue of a high base attack bonus when using the full attack action; see pages 22 and 143 in the *Player's Handbook*.

Lethal Damage: Damage that reduces a creature's hit points.

Natural Weapon: An appendage or other body part (such as teeth or claws) that a creature can use to attack other creatures or objects. Natural weaponry deals lethal damage without recourse to a class feature or feat,

such as Improved Unarmed Strike.

Nonlethal Damage: Damage that accumulates without reducing a creature's hit points. When a creature accumulates enough nonlethal damage to equal its current hit points, it is staggered. When a creature accumulates enough nonlethal damage to exceed its current hit points, it is unconscious. Some creatures ignore nonlethal damage.

Threatened Area: The area around a creature where it can make armed melee attacks. For most creatures, this is the band of squares adjacent to the creature.

Generally, a creature must wield a weapon or have a natural weapon to threaten an area.

Unarmed Attack/Unarmed Strike: These two terms are used interchangeably to describe an attack with an appendage that is not a natural weapon, such as a human's fist. An unarmed attack usually deals nonlethal damage and provokes an attack of opportunity from the creature being attacked.

Unarmed Attack Basics

The unarmed attack entry in Chapter 8 of the *Player's Handbook* contains most of the rules for fighting without weaponry. Here's an overview, along with a few additions and comments:

- You usually make an unarmed attack with a free hand.

As far as the rules are concerned, you can use just about any part of your body in an unarmed attack: a head butt, kick, elbow, knee, or forearm. This means you don't need a free hand to make an unarmed attack.

If you're making any unarmed attacks in addition to an attack with your primary hand (for instance, a sword slash and a kick or head butt), consider the unarmed attacks as off-hand attacks even if you aren't making them with a hand. See Part Two for notes about using unarmed strikes as primary and secondary weapons.

- An unarmed attack provokes an **attack of opportunity**.

The creature you target with your unarmed attack gets an attack of opportunity against you, provided that it is armed (that is, holding a weapon, has a natural weapon, or has the Improved Unarmed Strike feat). Other foes that threaten you don't get attacks of opportunity against you.

Technically, the creature you attack gets an attack of opportunity against you even if you're not in the area it threatens (or when it's too small to threaten the area around it) because you're reaching into its space to make your unarmed attack. For example, if you're size **Medium** and you use your 5-foot **reach** to make an unarmed attack against a **Tiny** creature (reach 0 feet) that has a weapon (natural or otherwise), you provoke an attack of opportunity. If you've ever tried to pick up an angry cat, you'll have no difficulty appreciating what the rules are trying to simulate here.

The attack of opportunity you provoke is resolved before your unarmed attack. If the attack of opportunity kills or

From page 301 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

Staggered: A character whose nonlethal damage exactly equals his current hit points is staggered. A staggered character may take a single move action or standard action each round (but not both, nor can she take full-round actions).

A character whose current hit points exceed his nonlethal damage is no longer staggered; a character whose nonlethal damage exceeds his hit points becomes unconscious.

Unconscious: Knocked out and helpless. Unconsciousness can result from having current hit points between -1 and -9, or from nonlethal damage in excess of current hit points.

knocks you out, your unarmed attack is spoiled.

- If your base attack bonus is high enough to give you iterative attacks, you can make multiple unarmed attacks when you use the full attack action.

This makes unarmed attacks fairly odd. Natural weaponry does not allow iterative attacks, but unarmed attacks -- which you make with part of your body -- do. This arises from the rules' attempt to simulate the sheer mastery some pugilists and martial artists achieve with unarmed strikes.

- When your unarmed attack hits, you deal unarmed strike damage.

For a Medium character, an unarmed strike deals 1d3 points of nonlethal damage, plus your **Strength** modifier. A **Small** character's unarmed strike deals 1d2 points of nonlethal damage. A **Large** character's unarmed strike deals 1d4 points of nonlethal damage.

An unarmed strike threatens a **critical hit** on an attack roll of 20 and deals double damage on a confirmed critical hit.

- You can deal lethal damage with an unarmed strike.

Anyone can deal lethal damage with an unarmed strike by taking a -4 penalty on the **attack roll**. This reflects the difficulty you have hitting the foe where it really hurts. You make the decision to take the penalty before you make the attack roll.

- It's possible to be considered armed when you attack without a weapon.

A creature with one or more natural weapons is always considered armed. That is, it threatens the area around it and does not provoke attacks of opportunity when attacking armed foes.

A creature delivering a spell or other magical effect with touch is considered armed when attempting to touch a subject.

The Improved Unarmed Strike feat allows you to function as though armed when making unarmed attacks.

- For purposes of weapon enhancements, an unarmed strike is considered a natural weapon.

If you attack without a weapon, a spell such as *magic weapon* won't help you, but a spell such as *magic fang* will. Unarmed strikes (even improved unarmed strikes) and natural weapons aren't equivalent, however, as we shall see in Part Two.

What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll consider the Improved Unarmed Strike feat and the monk class.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of

Dragon Magazine for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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